Something Good to Cling to

August 25, 2016

The mind has a habit which it likes to cling to. That’s how we’re born in the first place. Your mind couldn’t stay in the old body, and so it just hung on to its craving to find a new one. And depending on your karma, you had different options. And for one reason or another, you chose this body. That’s how you got here. And for most of us, that’s how we keep on living, just clinging, clinging, clinging to things, trying to find something we can hold on to. Because so many things in life just keep passing away. And our problem is that we’re not very selective in how we cling. Anything can come past. Sometimes things we don’t like at all, we just hold on to. The mind feeds off these things. One of the purposes of the practice is to give you a better place to feed. Its ultimate purpose is to get you so strong that you don’t need to feed anymore. But you’re not going to get to that spot unless you learn how to feed wisely, like right now as we’re meditating. We focus on the breath in the present moment and see what we can do to make it comfortable, to have a sense of well-being right here. And the pleasure of the breath may not be all that great, but the pleasure of a mind that’s able to settle down in a place that it knows is harmless and blameless, that’s a great pleasure. Because otherwise we’re trying to sit down in places that are like hot stoves. We sit down on one burner and we have to jump right up. We sit down on another one and jump right up. And sometimes you don’t realize how it’s heating up. Like the case of the frog, they put in water that gradually gets hotter and hotter. Now you’ve got to jump. And a mind that’s jumping all the time is not going to find any peace. And often it lands just any old place and finds that it’s trying to hold on to things and feed on things that are actually going to make it sick. So you jump again. But when the mind can stay in one place with a sense of well-being, have the sense that this is your place, that it can put down some of its tension, some of its tightness, and have a sense that it can spread out in style, this is a good place to hold on to. There’s an analogy that Ajahn Chah gives. You’re carrying a banana back from the market and someone asks you, “Why are you carrying the banana?” And you say, “I’m planning to eat it.” And they say, “Why are you carrying the peel, too? Are you going to eat that, too?” Well, you need the peel. Otherwise the banana’s going to turn into mush in your hand. So even though the peel is not what you’re after, it’s a necessary part of getting what you’re after, which is enjoying the banana at the time you want it. The same with the path. We hold on to the concentration. We hold on to the practice of generosity and virtue. We hold on to our discernment, because these things enable us to strengthen the mind and give us a good place to stay as other things in the world come and go. So that as the other things that we tend to hold on to and we tend to cling to begin to fall away, we have a safe place we can go back to. We have an option. The mind hasn’t been trained to have no options. It just jumps. So work on making this a place that you can hold on to consistently. Try to get to know the breath. Listen to the body’s needs and what it needs in terms of breath energy, and try to provide it. See which parts of the body you’re neglecting. Give them some energy, too. So there’s an all-around sense of well-being. Just be careful, though, that you don’t leave the breath to go to the sense of ease. That’s how delusion concentration happens. Delusion concentration is when you’re still but you’re not really quite sure where you are or what you’re focused on. You come out of it and you’re not really sure whether you were asleep or awake. It wasn’t quite asleep, but it wasn’t quite awake either. The mind is in a blur. That’s because it left the breath to go to the sense of ease. So stay with the sensation of the breathing, even as it gets subtle. The more subtle it gets, the more you have to spread your awareness around so you have a sense of the body as a whole, from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet. This is your place. This is your frame. Even if the breath grows still, have a sense of the full body being still. Stay with that stillness. This way you’ve got a foundation that you can stand on, a place you can rest, a place that gives you shelter. It’s both the floor for your mind and the roof for your mind, and the walls all around. When you’ve got a good place to stay like this, why go wandering out and dumpster diving? That’s what a lot of us do in our lives. We just go for whatever trash is out there. This way you can get more selective. Give yourself this option. Make it something that you can depend on, that helps you develop the strengths that are needed, the strength of conviction that yes, your actions really do make a difference. And because they make a difference, you have to be very careful about the mind. Because the actions come from the mind. Persistence, sticking with what you know is skillful, trying to let go of what’s not. Mindfulness, the Buddha singles this out as being one of the main refuges that you take. In other words, you learn lessons from your practice, you learn lessons from listening to the Dhamma and reading it. And you try to keep those in mind as you practice. That’s it. You’re going to keep all the books and all the talks in the mind all at once. Whatever’s relevant to being with the breath, keep that near at hand. When you’ve internalized the message of the Dhamma and the lessons of the Dhamma, that gives you something with which you can argue with the crazy voices in your mind. In fact, all three qualities that go with mindfulness are mindfulness, alertness, ardency, and the desire to do it well. These are the qualities of the mind that you can depend on. As you strengthen them, they turn into the factors of jhana. The mind settles down and has a sense of well-being right here. This is the strength that the Buddha compares most often with food. And as the mind settles down and it gets clearer, then you can start asking the right questions. Because as long as the mind is hungry, its main questions are going to be, “Where is the next food? Where is the next meal going to be?” But once you’re well-fed, then the questions are, “How is all this causing unnecessary stress and suffering?” Because that’s the focal point of the Buddha’s teachings right there. His message for us is that the reason we suffer is not so much from other people, it’s from what we do. Other people may be really bad, but if the mind is well-trained, it doesn’t have to suffer from that. So what is the mind doing? What is it telling itself right now? Can you see where your suffering is in this tendency to cling, to feed on things that are not worth feeding on, things that are actually poisonous? Can you see why you’re doing that? What’s the cause? What’s the craving that’s driving that? Can you abandon the craving? And the only way to do that is to deny it. Because craving has a lot of tricks. When you go along with it, you have no idea what its tricks are. But when you start saying no to it, it’s going to resist. It’s going to put up arguments. At first, it doesn’t put up clear arguments. But after a while, if you’re persistent enough and say, “I’m not going to go with that,” it’s going to start screaming and yelling. And then you listen to that. And if you have a good, solid place to stay, you can listen to it and not get persuaded by its screams, or its whispers, or however it presents its message. Then you say that you’re being driven around by something that really doesn’t have any good reasons. And because you’re already well-fed, it’s a lot easier to let go of that craving. So the Buddha doesn’t just tell you, “Let go, let go.” He gives you places to hold on to so you can let go of the things that are obviously unskillful and strengthen the mind so it gets to a point where it doesn’t need to hold on to anything at all. That’s when there’s really no suffering. And at the same point, that’s where we can really depend on ourselves. Because as long as you’re hoping to cling to unreliable things, the mind itself becomes unreliable. So give yourself a good place to stay right here. This makes it a lot easier to live in the world without suffering from the world. And we’re not leaning on the world. We’re taking that much of a burden off them, too.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2016/160825_Something_Good_to_Cling_to.mp3>